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How Does “Being Real” Feel?
The Experience of State Authenticity

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Abstract

Objective: We propose that the experience of state authenticity – the subjective sense of being one’s true self – ought to be considered separately from trait authenticity as well as from prescriptions regarding what *should* make people feel authentic. *Methods:* In Study 1 ($N = 104$), participants rated the frequency of and motivation for experiences of authenticity and inauthenticity. Studies 2 ($N = 268$) and 3 ($N = 93$) asked participants to describe their experiences of authenticity or inauthenticity. Participants in Studies 1 and 2 also completed measures of trait authenticity, and participants in Study 3 rated their experience with respect to several phenomenological dimensions. *Results:* Study 1 demonstrated that people are motivated to experience state authenticity and avoid inauthenticity and that such experiences are common, regardless of one’s degree of trait authenticity. Coding of Study 2’s narratives identified the emotions accompanying and needs fulfilled in each state. Trait authenticity generally did not qualify the nature of (in)authentic experiences. Study 3 corroborated the results of Study 2 and further revealed positive mood and nostalgia as consequences of reflecting on experiences of authenticity. *Conclusions:* We discuss implications of these findings for conceptualizations of authenticity and the self.

Keywords: state authenticity, self, autobiographical narratives, affect and emotion, need satisfaction.

Authenticity is a prevalent concept in popular culture, with people either striving to attain it or claiming to possess it (Rosenbloom, 2011). But what does it mean to feel *true*, *real*, and *authentic*? Most empirical work views authenticity from a trait perspective. Accordingly, participants in such studies report the degree to which they generally feel, think, and behave in line with a set of criteria supposedly indicative of authenticity (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008). For example, participants have rated the extent to which their behavior usually expresses their values (Kernis & Goldman, 2006) and whether they usually do as others prefer (Wood et al., 2008). These studies demonstrate that trait authenticity is associated with greater life satisfaction and self-esteem (Goldman & Kernis, 2002), increased subjective well-being and decreased stress (Wood et al., 2008), and higher mindfulness and lesser verbal defensiveness (Lakey, Kernis, Heppner, & Lance, 2008).

State authenticity as a construct is far less understood. This is due to lack of definitional clarity (Erickson, 1995; Harter, 2002; Heppner et al., 2008) and of conceptual development from relevant theoretical perspectives (self-determination theory: Deci & Ryan, 2000; sociometer theory: Leary, 1999). Our overarching aim is to improve understanding of state authenticity by considering it in its own right.

Traits and States

We draw on previous distinctions between traits and states (Fleeson, 2001; Nezlek, 2007). A trait is a person's base-rate propensity toward (or away from) a set of cognitions, emotions, or actions; a state is the actual set of cognitions, emotions, or actions in a particular situation (Endler, Parker, Bagby, & Cox, 1991). Traits and states are further distinguishable with respect to: (a) their duration (states are shorter-lived); (b) the degree to which they are continuous in nature (a given episode of a state manifests relatively continuously, whereas traits are less uniform across time); and (c) the extent to which they are abstract entities and, thus, necessitate inference rather than direct experience to discern (traits are more abstract than states; Fridhandler, 1986). Attesting to the validity of these distinctions, traits can be predicted from a sample of state episodes but not from a single state episode (Nezlek, 2007).

Our studies assessed the experiential aspect of state authenticity, adopting the view that “if a person is in a state he or she must be able to feel it” (Fridhandler, 1986, p. 170). This subjective sense of authenticity is believed to be important, because it helps to maintain and facilitate self-coherence. In other words, it tells people whether they are integrated and organized (Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997). For example, felt authenticity may signal that one’s values have been upheld, whereas felt inauthenticity may signal that one’s values have been undermined (Erickson, 1995). Individuals who lack a stable sense of self – as may be indicated by a sense of inauthenticity – risk their well-being (Ritchie, Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Gidron, 2011; Sedikides, Wildschut, Gaertner, Routledge, & Arndt, 2008; Stephan, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2012). Furthermore, if authenticity is indeed an idealized state that anyone can and should experience (Maslow, 1971; Rogers, 1961), it is crucial to know how people recognize its attainment.

Trait Authenticity

Trait perspectives – which owe much to humanistic constructs such as “self-actualization” (Maslow, 1971) and the “fully functioning person” (Rogers, 1961) – conceive of authenticity as a disposition toward self-congruent behavior. Or as Maslow put it, “authenticity is the reduction of phoniness toward the zero point” (p. 183). According to Kernis and Goldman (2006), for example, the authentic person possesses: *Awareness* of and motivation to know one’s goals, feelings, and self-beliefs, even if contradictory; *Unbiased Processing* of one’s attributes, emotions, experiences and knowledge; *Behavior* in accord with one’s personal needs, desires, and values; and a *Relational Orientation* toward honesty and openness with others.

A more recent trait-based approach to authenticity — we label it the Authentic Personality model — posits that, to be authentic, one’s actions must align with the personal values, preferences, beliefs, and motivations of which one is aware (Wood et al., 2008). This idea is expressed by the model’s *Authentic Living* facet. Also, an authentic person is someone who does not *Accept External Influence*. The third facet, *Self-Alienation*, is the only one that addresses how inauthenticity might *feel* to the person experiencing it, with this feeling resulting

from failures in the other two domains. Excluding the notion of self-alienation, both models (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood et al.) contain clear prescriptions regarding the achievement of authenticity (e.g., behaving in accord with one's desires and values, rejecting external influence).

State Authenticity

Similarly, accounts of state authenticity propose that people are authentic in a situation only if there is a match between their enduring propensities (e.g., attitudes, values, beliefs, personality) and their cognitions or actions in that situation. For example, the self-concordance model (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998) suggests that people are self-concordant (i.e., authentic) if there is a fit between their situational goal strivings and their personal values. Other accounts conceive of state authenticity in terms of momentary access to the self system. According to personality systems interaction theory (Kuhl, 2000), the self-system comprises implicit representations of one's feelings, needs, and goals. Self-infiltration of another person's goals, for example, is deemed inauthentic because it is indicative of inadequate access to the self-system (Baumann & Kuhl, 2003). Bargh and colleagues (Bargh, McKenna, Fitzsimons, 2002; see also Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, & King, 2008) likewise posit that access to the true self affords authenticity. By and large, state authenticity has been operationalized similarly to trait authenticity: as value- or trait-behavior consistency, self-awareness, and rejection of others' influence.

Others have proposed, however, that state authenticity is better understood as a phenomenological experience, which may manifest itself as "psychological tension" when thwarted (Harter, 2002; p. 383). Similarly, Erickson (1995) argued that emotions are central to the experience of authenticity: The self is more a *felt* experience than a cognitive evaluation. Theorists from the humanistic tradition suggest that emotions are central to authenticity, because a feeling of authenticity signals to the individual that the self is integrated and organized (Sheldon et al., 1997). Indeed, the subjective sense of authenticity is a better predictor of well-being than is cross-role personality consistency (Sheldon et al.). So what is known about the conditions under which authenticity is subjectively experienced?

The state-content significance hypothesis holds that some ways of acting feel more authentic due to characteristics of the actions themselves rather than due to whether these actions reflect the person's traits (Fleeson and Wilt, 2010). Supporting this hypothesis, Fleeson and Wilt's results showed that people felt more authentic when behaving in an extraverted, agreeable, open, and conscientious way, even when those people were not dispositionally extraverted, agreeable, open, or conscientious. There are two related but distinct explanations for these findings. The first emphasizes the social normativeness of the authenticity-inducing personality profile. Sherman, Nave, and Funder (2012) reported that the typical person is more extraverted than introverted, more agreeable than disagreeable, etc. Therefore, irrespective of their actual personality traits, people may feel most authentic "when they manage to act in a normative and [...] psychologically well-adjusted manner" (p. 88). The second explanation picks up from the latter point regarding psychological adjustment. In particular, people may feel authentic not because they are conforming to social norms, but rather because they are conforming to their own ideal selves. Research on gender stereotypes shows that integration of social norms into the ideal self can yield higher levels of perceived congruence between actual and ideal selves (Wood, Christensen, Hebl, & Rothgerber, 1997).

Another relevant research area relating to when people experience state (in)authenticity concerns emotional labor. Hochschild (1983) observed that some people are required to manage the expression, if not the experience, of their emotions as part of their job duties (e.g., "service with a smile"). As a result, employees may come to feel alienated from their own emotions and, thus, inauthentic ("emotive dissonance"; Hochschild, p. 90). However, it is not emotion regulation per se that leads to inauthenticity but, rather, it is emotion regulation coupled with the belief that one's job requires one to be good at "handling" people (Wharton, 1999). Thus, external pressure (lack of autonomy), not merely a discrepancy between feelings and behavior, may be critical for the subjective experience of inauthenticity.

Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000) explicitly speaks to the role of satisfaction of the need for autonomy (i.e., the need to organize one's own

experience and behavior so that they accord with one's sense of self) in state authenticity. Satisfaction of autonomy plus two other needs is considered paramount: competence (i.e., the need to feel capable and effective in bringing about desired outcomes) and relatedness (i.e., the need for connection with and love for and by others). This is because satisfaction of all three needs facilitates goal internalization, and goal internalization is a presumed precondition for authenticity (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998). Cognitive evaluation theory, a derivative of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), proposes that autonomy and competence (together with an internal "locus of causality" for the particular competence, p. 70) are especially potent in producing authenticity. There is, however, little research in direct support of these hypotheses. The one exception is a diary study demonstrating that daily variability in satisfaction of autonomy, relatedness, and competence needs correlated positively with felt authenticity (Heppner et al., 2008).

Similarly, there is little evidence, other than this diary study, that bears upon Leary's (2003) proposal that satisfaction of relational needs plays a pivotal role in the experience of authenticity. According to this contention, people who gain acceptance by behaving according to their natural inclinations will feel authentic, whereas people who go against their natural inclinations to gain social approval will feel inauthentic. Thus, authenticity is thought to result from the joint satisfaction of autonomy and relatedness needs. Supporting this contention, albeit indirectly, research indicates that people are more likely to feel authentic in the company of friends (Sheldon et al., 1997; Turner & Billings, 1991). Given the intimate links between social approval and self-esteem (sociometer theory; Leary, 1999), one might further predict that it is the specific conjunction of feelings of high relatedness, autonomy, and self-esteem that contributes to the sense of authenticity. Again, only Heppner et al.'s (2008) diary study addresses this prediction: It revealed a correlation between daily variability in self-esteem and felt authenticity. Questions remain, however: Does the feeling that one's needs have been satisfied indeed coincide or with or even cause the experience of authenticity and, if so, which needs are especially relevant?

In the only study that has considered adults' subjective experience of state authenticity more broadly (Turner & Billings, 1991), university undergraduates in 1973 wrote about an occasion in which their true self had been expressed and an occasion in which their feelings or actions contradicted their true self. The researchers examined the narratives' content for experiential features of the situation (e.g., "emotional ambience", p. 106). Authentic-self situations were characterized by an atmosphere of acceptance and sympathy, of being on a break or holiday, and of openness. Inauthentic-self situations had an atmosphere of superficial sociability and awkwardness. Overall, true-self situations possessed a more positive emotional ambience than false-self situations. This conclusion is similar to one drawn by Rice and Pasupathi (2010), who elicited descriptions and emotion-ratings of an event that was either consistent or discrepant with participants' sense of self. Self-consistent events contained more positive than negative emotions (for older adults only), whereas self-discrepant events contained more negative than positive emotions. While such conclusions seem evident, researchers have yet to identify the specific emotions that are associated with the subjective experience of authenticity (or inauthenticity). Harter's (2002) notion of psychological tension suggests that anxiety may be a key feature of inauthenticity, but it is unknown whether there are other negatively-valenced emotions associated with this state and, further, which specific emotions characterize the experience of authenticity.

Impetus for Our Research

Our research examined people's accounts of the subjective experience of state authenticity in order to test the proposition that state authenticity can be empirically and theoretically distinguished from trait authenticity. This approach to state authenticity is warranted, because the available conceptual definitions are disjointed. As Rozin (2009) argued, it is vital that researchers undertake a careful inspection and possess a clear understanding of a phenomenon's properties before they set upon hypothesis testing. Accordingly, gaining an understanding of state authenticity, as it is subjectively experienced, will provide a solid basis

upon which to build a more comprehensive and ecologically valid account of authenticity in all of its forms.

We proceeded as follows. The first study assessed the frequency with which people experience authenticity and the strength of their motivations to achieve it or, in the case of inauthenticity, avoid it. Studies 2 and 3 examined the experience of state authenticity by considering the content of people's narratives describing situations in which they felt either authentic or inauthentic. Study 2 additionally tested whether trait authenticity moderates the experience of state (in)authenticity and Study 3 investigated participants' phenomenological perceptions of these events.

STUDY 1

We gauged the frequency of and motivation for experiences of authenticity and inauthenticity. Only if state authenticity is a frequent and significant experience will the elicitation of individual descriptions thereof be of theoretical and practical importance. After responding to a survey on the role of (in)authenticity in their lives, participants completed a measure of trait authenticity. Thus, this study also provided an initial assessment of state authenticity's discriminant validity from trait authenticity.

Method

Participants

We recruited 104 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), a website offering paid online tasks. MTurk participants are generally more representative of the American public than are standard internet and university samples; importantly, results of studies conducted via MTurk are consistent with studies conducted in more traditional ways (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Mason & Suri, 2010; Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010). Participants, who received \$0.40 ($n = 85$) or \$0.50 ($n = 19$), were 66 women and 38 men between 18 and 77 years of age ($M = 35.3$, $SD = 12.99$). The majority were from the United States (99%) and native English speakers (89.4%; otherwise, they reported being either *mostly* or *perfectly* fluent).

Materials and Procedure

The first part of the survey included 12 items assessing the frequency of experiences of authenticity and inauthenticity and strength of motivation to experience authenticity or avoid inauthenticity. To assess frequency, we asked participants: (a) whether (yes vs. no) they had ever experienced (in)authenticity; (b) to rate the general frequency of (in)authenticity's occurrence (1 = *very rarely*, 7 = *very frequently*); and (c) to make a more concrete frequency estimation (1 = *never*, 10 = *at least once a day*, with relevant labels in between). To assess motivation, participants indicated: (a) how much they value attaining authenticity (or avoiding inauthenticity; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*); (b) how important it is that they experience authenticity (or avoid inauthenticity; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*); and (c) how much effort they put into experiencing authenticity (or avoiding inauthenticity; 1 = *none at all*, 7 = *the most possible*). Participants received broad, experience-focused definitions of the critical terms: (a) "According to psychologists, the *sense of authenticity* is defined as 'the sense or feeling that you are in alignment with your *true, genuine* self.' In other words, the *sense of authenticity* is the feeling that you are being your *real self*."; (b) "According to psychologists, the *sense of inauthenticity* is defined as 'the sense or feeling that you are in alignment with an *untrue, false* self.' In other words, the sense of inauthenticity is the feeling that you are not being your *real self*."

Note that these definitions prescribed neither why these feelings arise nor the particular nature of the feelings (e.g., in terms of emotional content or intensity). Next, participants completed the Authentic Personality scale (AP; Wood et al., 2008; $\alpha = .89$). Finally, participants responded to demographic questions.

Results and Discussion

Frequency of Experience

Most participants had experienced authenticity (94.2%) and inauthenticity (91.3%). The items assessing general and concrete frequencies were highly correlated for both authenticity and inauthenticity (.85 and .87, respectively). We present the mean values for the concrete item, as its unambiguous anchors were less susceptible to idiosyncratic interpretation. On average, participants reported experiencing authenticity approximately one to two times each week ($M =$

7.38, $SD = 2.29$) and inauthenticity nearly every two months ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 2.64$). Frequencies of experienced authenticity and inauthenticity were weakly inversely related ($r = -.21$, $p = .03$).

Motivation for Experience

We averaged the three items assessing motivation for authenticity ($\alpha = .82$) and the three items assessing motivation to avoid inauthenticity ($\alpha = .69$). These motivations were strong (authenticity seeking: $M = 5.83$, $SD = 1.21$; inauthenticity avoidance: $M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.32$). The composites were also positively and significantly correlated ($r = .52$, $p = .001$): As participants' motivation to experience authenticity increased, so did their motivation to avoid inauthenticity.

Trait versus State Authenticity

To assess the degree to which trait authenticity accounts for experiences of and motivations concerning state authenticity, we examined the simple correlations between trait authenticity and each frequency of authenticity ($r = .38$, $p = .001$), frequency of inauthenticity ($r = -.53$, $p = .001$), motivation to experience authenticity ($r = .06$, $p = .573$), and motivation to avoid experiencing inauthenticity ($r = .05$, $p = .635$). Although trait authenticity was a medium-to-large predictor of experiences of state (in)authenticity, much variability remained unexplained. Notably, trait authenticity did not account for state (in)authenticity motivations.

Furthermore, these were not extraordinary experiences for either end of the trait authenticity spectrum. Among participants low in trait authenticity (up to the 25th percentile), 88% had experienced both states, which is similar to the percentage of those high in trait authenticity (75th percentile or above) who had experienced both states (88.5%). Likewise, there were few participants either low (4.0%) or high (3.8%) in trait authenticity who reported never having experienced either state. Just 8% of those low in trait authenticity claimed only ever to have experienced inauthenticity, and 7.7% of those high in trait authenticity claimed only ever to have experienced authenticity. Finally, motivations to experience authenticity and avoid inauthenticity were strong for both groups, with ratings between 5.30 and 6.00 on a 7-point scale.

Summary

Experiences of authenticity and inauthenticity are widespread and not fully explained by trait authenticity. Having many authentic experiences related only slightly to having fewer inauthentic experiences. Also supportive of a distinct state perspective, even participants with the lowest levels of trait authenticity reported having experienced authenticity and, conversely, even those with the highest levels of trait authenticity had felt inauthentic. Regardless of their trait authenticity, people possess strong motivations concerning the experience of both authenticity and inauthenticity, attesting to the relevance of these experiences in their lives.

STUDY 2

Participants described a time when they felt “most me” or “least me.” In addition to coding for the experiential themes, emotions, and needs associated with state (in)authenticity, the study explored the relation between real and ideal selves by coding for the narrators’ idealistic self-portrayals. There are several hints that feeling ideal and real are intertwined. First, and as discussed previously, some of the behaviors that elicit the sense of authenticity are also those that are socially and psychologically ideal (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Sherman et al., 2012). Second, experiences that are in line with internalized ideal standards yield high levels of perceived overlap between actual and ideal selves (Wood et al., 1997). Third, past research shows that a considerable degree of overlap between actual and ideal selves remains despite significant differences between their content (Pelham & Swann, 1989). Finally, across a variety of domains, people possess positive illusions about themselves (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003, 2008). Thus, feeling ideal may contribute to feeling real.

Study 2 examined our contention that individuals’ predispositions toward authenticity are separable from their situational experience of authenticity. We are aware of only two other studies that examined the trait-by-state relationship. One indicated that trait authenticity moderates state authenticity (Ito & Kodama, 2007): People lower in trait authenticity were more likely to experience state authenticity in nonsocial situations, whereas people higher in trait authenticity were more likely to experience state authenticity in social situations. The other

found no consistent moderation of state authenticity by trait authenticity (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010). Neither study, however, focused on the phenomenology of these experiences.

Method

Participants

As part of a class project, University of Edinburgh psychology undergraduates recruited 273 participants for this study, though five were excluded from data analysis (one for being under 18, two for an inappropriate narrative, and two for inadvertently being left out of the MTurk codings). The final sample of 268 participants (136 women, 132 men), ranged in age from 18 to 76 years ($M = 23.46$, $SD = 10.71$), with nearly 90% under 30. No substantive gender differences emerged, thus we omitted this variable in the analyses below. Given that age was a positive correlate of the Authenticity Inventory (AI; $r = .19$, $p = .03$; Kernis & Goldman, 2006), we controlled for it in relevant analyses. Age and the AP were uncorrelated ($r = .05$, $p = .62$).

Materials and Procedure

The paper-and-pencil survey asked half of the participants to describe an event during which “you felt most like your *true* or *real self*,” and the other half to describe an event during which “you felt least like your *true* or *real self*.” Participants addressed the location of the event, what happened during the event, and who else was there. Supporting the validity of this approach, Rice and Pasupathi (2010) demonstrated that events described in self-consistent narratives were perceived as more representative, whereas events described in self-inconsistent narratives were seen as less representative, of participants’ usual selves.

Participants next completed *either* the AI ($\alpha = .83$) or the AP ($\alpha = .81$). These trait measures were administered after the assessment of state (in)authenticity so that participants would write narratives based on their own, unfiltered understanding of what it means to be real or true. The manipulation did not affect responses on either measure, $ts < |1.0|$, $ps > .40$. The survey concluded with demographic questions.

Coding experiential content. To identify experiential characteristics that coincide with the sense of (in)authenticity, we relied on a sample of MTurk raters ($N = 281$; $M_{\text{age}} = 32.23$, $SD_{\text{age}} =$

11.41; 54.5% female; 90.6% native English speakers; 87.9% with university-level coursework). Each rater was randomly assigned to a narrative so that three different individuals rated each narrative with respect to four features (raters were paid \$0.30 per narrative): (a) *themes* — to identify the presence (yes or no) of 17 experiential themes (the list of themes was developed by the two senior authors after reading narratives collected from two independent studies; Table 1); (b) *emotions* — to indicate whether the narrative provided evidence (yes or no) that the writer experienced any of 11 emotion clusters (Table 2), which were selected based on emotion prototypes (Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987) and select subtype emotions (i.e., satisfaction, disappointment, relief, anxiety) related to self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987); (c) *needs* — to indicate for each of 10 needs (e.g., “relatedness—where person feels close and connected with others”; Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001) whether (yes or no) the “*average person* put into the writer’s/narrator’s ‘shoes’ ... would feel that the need had been fulfilled/satisfied”; and (d) *idealistic portrayal* — to rate the extent to which the writer portrayed him/herself in an idealistic way (1 = *not at all idealistic*, 5 = *very idealistic*). If at least two MTurk raters agreed on a code, we assigned that code to the narrative (for ‘idealistic portrayal,’ we averaged the three ratings). Across the binary codings, absolute agreement — where all three raters assigned the same code ($M = 61.89\%$, $SD = 11.96$) — far exceeded chance levels (12.5%). For ‘idealistic portrayal,’ inter-rater agreement also surpassed the odds by a substantial margin (e.g., two-rater agreement: 61.2% obtained versus 4.0% odds).

Results and Discussion

Experiential Content

The average Spearman correlation among the experiential themes was low ($r_s = .16$, $SD = .12$), supporting the idea that the themes were not redundant. Table 1 shows the frequency of each theme by condition. Most-me (vs. least-me) narratives were more likely to involve: (a) fun, amusement, or excitement; (b) achievement or success; (c) a return to familiar people, places, or activities; (d) spending time with close others, but not doing anything in particular; (e) helping someone; and (f) being creative. Least-me (vs. most-me) narratives were more likely to involve:

(a) reacting to a negative or difficult event; (b) the feeling of being evaluated by others; (c) demonstrating (a lack of) social competence; (d) feeling isolated; (e) failing one's own standards; (f) doing as others expect or the situation demands; (g) trying something new; (h) failing the standards of others; and (i) feeling ill. The narrative conditions did not differ with respect to engaging in contemplation or experiencing bereavement.

As Table 2 shows, raters perceived a difference between most-me and least-me events with respect to the presence of all emotion clusters except surprise/amazement/astonishment. Most-me events were more likely to contain the positive emotion clusters, least-me events the negative emotion clusters. Contentment was the emotional hallmark of authenticity experiences, whereas anxiety was the emotional hallmark of inauthenticity experiences.

Table 2 shows the frequency of perceived need satisfaction by narrative condition. Least-me narratives were not seen to have fulfilled any need. Most-me narratives, in contrast, were seen to have fulfilled all needs – especially self-esteem and relatedness, then autonomy – except for money/luxury. The raters also perceived the writers of most-me narratives as having presented a significantly more idealistic version of themselves than did writers of the least-me narratives (Table 2), suggesting potential overlap between real and ideal selves.

Below we present narratives that typify the content of most-me experiences:

I felt most myself when my boyfriend told me that he loved me. I finally felt I could express myself fully around him and that I had nothing to prove. I was in my flat in the kitchen making tea. I felt I could say I loved him too without hesitation and would not feel embarrassed or awkward or wish I had not said it.

After sixth form one day we went down to the mill pond [...] in Cambridge and we rented a punt-boat, and went down the river for a couple of hours and moored up and had a bbq and drinks. I was with my girlfriend and three best friends and we stayed there late drinking, chilling out, and talking about our lives and childhoods. I was really happy at that moment in life and felt relaxed, honest and that nothing else mattered or would ever change.

The narratives below illustrate the content and phenomenology of least-me experiences:

In my adult life, the time [...] I felt least like myself was my first official day at university.

Although I went to lectures with a few people I knew from school, the environment was completely unknown and I felt out of my depth. The buildings were unrecognizable as were the people. I felt as though I was alone and had lost my sense of self.

I was at the company headquarters, waiting in the reception area. I was taken by the receptionist to an upstairs room. I entered the room to find two men sitting behind a table. [...] I felt very nervous, aware that I had to put on a good performance, to exaggerate my skills otherwise I would have no chance of landing the job. The two men took it in turns to ask me questions and I had to think quickly to construct a convincing answer without freezing up completely and my mind going blank due to [...] trying to be someone else [...] super-confident, most unlike the reserved and modest Scot that I was.

Moderation by Trait Authenticity

To examine whether trait authenticity moderated the above results, we subjected the theme, emotion, and need ratings to logistic binary regression analysis. Each theme ($n = 17$), emotion ($n = 11$), and need ($n = 10$) served as the dependent variable in a logistic regression in which narrative condition, trait authenticity (represented by the relevant standardized scale), and the Condition \times Trait Authenticity interactions were predictors. When idealistic portrayal served as the dependent variable, the relevant analyses were performed using linear regression. In the analyses involving AI, participant age (standardized) was a covariate.

If the experience of authenticity — or inauthenticity — differs as a function of one's standing on trait authenticity, we would expect to find significant Condition \times Trait Authenticity interactions. If, on the other hand, there is commonality as to how state authenticity is experienced, then trait authenticity will not moderate the experience of state (in)authenticity.

Authenticity Inventory. There were only two significant narrative Condition \times Trait Authenticity interactions across the 39 codings [all else: Wald $\chi^2 < 3.30$, $p > .05$, or $t(128) = .26$,

$p = .80$]: (a) Theme—*Achievement*: Wald $\chi^2 = 4.12$, $p = .042$, Exp[B] = .30; and (b)

Emotion—*Contentment*: Wald $\chi^2 = 5.11$, $p = .024$, Exp[B] = .16.

Authentic Personality. For the AP, there also were only two significant narrative Condition \times Trait Authenticity interactions across the 39 codings (all else: Wald $\chi^2 < 3.50$, $p > .05$, or $t(121) = -.51$, $p = .61$): (a) Theme—*Familiarity*: Wald $\chi^2 = 4.8$, $p = .027$, Exp[B] = 2.94; and (b) Emotion—*Love/Compassion/ Affection*: Wald $\chi^2 = 4.09$, $p = .043$, Exp[B] = 5.16.

Summary

Having fun, engaging in familiar activities, striving for achievement, and hanging out were important themes in most-me experiences. Dominant themes of least-me experiences included unpleasant challenges (awkward social, isolated, or difficult situations) as well as situations in which one's own or another's expectations or standards were salient and, perhaps, unmet. Most-me situations were mainly characterized by low arousal positive emotions (in particular, contentment, calmness). Least-me experiences were exclusively characterized by negative emotions, predominantly anxiety but also low arousal emotions (e.g., disappointment, sadness). Also, most-me situations involved high levels of satisfaction of both self-esteem and relatedness needs, and real-self situations shared some characteristics with ideal-self situations. Trait authenticity qualified only two narrative condition effects for each scale. Thus, state (in)authenticity is experientially similar for people, no matter their dispositional authenticity.

STUDY 3

Study 3 aimed to replicate the findings of Study 2 and examine subjective perceptions of most-me and least-me events. Participants wrote about and then rated their own narrative of a most- or least-me event with respect to situational affect, need satisfaction, ideal-self overlap, self-esteem, and public/private self-consciousness. Thus, in addition to testing the relation between real and ideal self in greater detail, we conducted a more focused assessment of the role of self-esteem, given its theorized and observed associations with trait and state authenticity (Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Heppner et al., 2008). Also, we assessed directly the subjective experience of situational private and public self-consciousness, in light of Study 2's finding

concerning the role of social context in (in)authenticity as well as theorizing concerning the purported relation between authenticity and each public (Bargh et al., 2002; Turner & Billings, 1991) and private (Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Koole & Kuhl, 2003) self-consciousness. As in Study 2, the narratives were coded by external raters to identify key experiential themes. Finally, this study examined the consequences of recalling a past instance of (in)authenticity for one's current emotions. Can brief experiences of authenticity yield benefits beyond that moment?

Method

Participants

We tested 108 online volunteers. We excluded those who did not submit a narrative alongside their ratings ($n = 11$) or submitted a too-brief or irrelevant narrative ($n = 4$). Of the remaining 93 participants, 69 were women and 21 were men (3 unreported), ranging in age between 18 and 61 years ($M = 30.94$, $SD = 12.77$).

Materials and Procedure

Participants first wrote about one of two types of situations: Approximately half ($n = 45$) described an event during which "you felt *most* like your *true* or *real self*," whereas the other half ($n = 48$) described an event during which "you felt *least* like your *true* or *real self*." Next, participants rated the event using modified forms of the following scales (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*): (a) short-form Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Kercher, 1992); (b) Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965); and (c) private and public self-consciousness scales (Fenigstein, Seheier, & Buss, 1975). The focal modification of these scales centered on asking participants to rate their psychological state (e.g., state self-esteem) in that specific situation. Participants also rated their narrative on the extent to which the experience aligned with their ideal self (10 attributes from the Self-Attributes Questionnaire; Pelham & Swann, 1989) and on the extent to which each of 10 psychological needs were satisfied during the event (one item per need; Sheldon et al., 2001). All scales had high internal consistency: positive affect (PA; $\alpha = .88$); negative affect (NA; $\alpha = .89$); state self-esteem (SE; $\alpha = .95$), state private self-consciousness (PriSC; $\alpha = .87$); state public self-consciousness (PubSC; $\alpha = .94$);

situational ideal self (ISelf; $\alpha = .89$); and situational need satisfaction (NSat; $\alpha = .90$). Finally, participants rated their current affective state: (a) When you reflect on this experience *now*, how do you feel? (1 = *low/negative*, 7 = *up/positive*); (b) Do you feel nostalgic about the time you described? (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). The survey concluded with demographic items.

Coding experiential content. Three of a sample of MTurk raters ($N = 68$; $M_{\text{age}} = 34.99$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.01$; 60% female; 96% native English speakers; 93% with university-level coursework) were randomly assigned to rate each narrative with respect to 17 themes (as in Study 2). The MTurk raters did not code for emotions and need satisfaction; instead, participants made their own ratings of these and other variables. Absolute agreement across themes (where all three raters gave the same code) was common ($M = 47.4\%$) and exceeded chance (12.5%).¹

Results and Discussion

Experiential Content

Themes. Reinforcing the idea that the themes are not redundant, the average Spearman correlation among them was again small ($r_s = .15$, $SD = .12$). Table 1 shows the frequency of each theme by condition. Narratives in the most-me (vs. least-me) condition were more likely to involve: (a) returning to familiar places, people, or activities; (b) hanging out; (c) achievement; (d) creativity (though only marginally so); and (e) fun. Least-me (vs. most-me) narratives, on the other hand, were more likely to involve: (a) the pressure of others' expectations; (b) the feeling of being evaluated by others; (c) failing one's own standards; (d) failing someone else's standards; (e) feeling isolated; (f) feeling ill; and (g) experiencing bereavement (marginally). The most-me and least-me narratives did not differ with respect to: (a) trying something new; (b) contemplation; (c) sociality; and (d) helping someone.

Participants' ratings. Table 3 shows the mean values and statistical comparisons between least-me and most-me narratives for participants' ratings. Most-me narratives, on average, were

¹ We are also confident about the MTurk codings, because they correlated in meaningful ways with participants' own ratings of the events; analyses available upon request.

associated with significantly greater positive affect, lesser negative affect, greater self-esteem, lesser public and private self-consciousness, a more ideal self (except concerning athletic ability), and greater need satisfaction (except concerning money/luxury) than were least-me narratives. Clearly, most-me experiences feel better than least-me experiences. Reflecting on these events at a later date made participants in the most-me condition feel more positive and more nostalgic than those in the least-me condition.

To assess which emotions were more critical to most-me and least-me situations, we compared each positive affect attribute to the average PA, and each negative affect attribute to the average NA, for the relevant condition. In the most-me condition, none of the PA attributes were significantly different from the condition's average PA (all $ps > .50$). There was only one marginal comparison among the NA attributes for participants in the most-me condition: They were somewhat more nervous in comparison to any other negative emotion, $t(44) = 1.97, p = .056$ (all other $ps > .30$). For the least-me condition, participants' nervousness was significantly greater than the other negative attributes, $t(45) = 2.28, p = .028$, whereas their self-reported fear was marginally lower than the other negative attributes, $t(47) = -1.70, p = .096$. With respect to the PA attributes, all were either marginally [determined: $t(47) = 1.88, p = .067$] or significantly different from the average PA in the least-me condition, $ts(47) > |2.10|, ps < .040$. Feelings of alertness and determination were higher than average, whereas feelings of inspiration, excitement, and enthusiasm were lower than average.

To determine which ideal-self attributes were critical to each state, we compared the mean overlap between the situation and the ideal self for each attribute to the average across all attributes for each condition separately. Among participants in the most-me condition, the greatest overlap with the ideal self occurred with respect to intellect, $t(44) = 2.70, p = .010$, common sense, $t(44) = 3.41, p = .001$, and humor, $t(44) = 2.22, p = .032$, whereas the least overlap with the ideal self occurred with respect to artistic abilities, $t(43) = -2.13, p = .039$, and athletic abilities, $t(44) = -4.15, p = .001$. The other attributes (social competence, physical attractiveness, leadership, emotional stability, and self-discipline) were not significantly different

from the condition mean (all $ps > .14$). Among participants in the least-me condition, none of the attributes differed significantly from the overall attribute mean (all $ps > .26$).

We conducted a similar analysis to assess which needs were most likely to be fulfilled in each condition. Among participants in the most-me condition, the needs most likely to be satisfied were autonomy, $t(44) = 6.23, p = .001$, pleasure, $t(44) = 2.25, p = .030$, and self-esteem, $t(44) = 3.74, p = .001$, with the need for relatedness also being marginally greater than the average need satisfaction in this condition, $t(44) = 1.86, p = .070$. The other needs (competence, meaning, physical thriving, security, and popularity/influence) were not significantly different from the overall mean for this condition (all $ps > .14$). Among participants in the least-me condition, the needs least likely to be satisfied were the needs for physical thriving, $t(46) = -2.75, p = .008$, and pleasure, $t(46) = -2.06, p = .045$. The other eight needs were not significantly different from the overall mean for this condition (all $ps > .19$).

Summary

As in Study 2, most-me experiences involved fun, hanging out with others, familiar settings, or achievement. In contrast, least-me experiences were characterized by a sense of having (and, perhaps, failing) to meet certain expectations, feeling judged, facing difficult situations or experiencing isolation. Self-ratings confirmed the independent coders' perceptions in the previous study: Most-me (vs. least-me) narratives were associated with more positive and less negative affect, higher self-esteem, lesser self-consciousness (both public and private), stronger overlap with the ideal self (especially in the domains of intellect, common sense, and humor), and greater need satisfaction (especially of autonomy, pleasure, and self-esteem). Subsequent reflection upon most-me (vs. least-me) experiences induced positive mood and nostalgia.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Written reference to *authenticity* hearkens back to the Greek philosophers (Harter, 2002) and the seeds of psychological interest in this concept were planted in our field's earliest days (Vannini & Franzese, 2008). Despite *authenticity* remaining a central topic of interest among modern psychologists (researchers and practitioners) as well as among the general population,

the concept remains relatively amorphous. Kernis and Goldman (2006) suggested that the confusion surrounding authenticity's meaning may be due not only to the plethora of available definitions, but also to the possibility that the concept is at the very "limits of language" (p. 284). Our research shows, however, that people can indeed put words to this experience and, further, that by examining those words, one acquires an ecologically valid understanding of how people experience authenticity. Accordingly, the present research provides a more solid basis for future theorizing regarding the triggers, content and, ultimately, functions of state authenticity.

Relevance of State (In)Authenticity

Study 1 showed that feelings of authenticity and inauthenticity vary *within* people and, further, that such variations are commonplace. On average, the feeling of authenticity occurs at least weekly, whereas the feeling of inauthenticity occurs every other month. Over 88% of the sample reported feelings of both authenticity and inauthenticity. Further, the frequencies of these two types of experiences were only weakly inversely related. Finally, feeling either authentic or inauthentic is not the default state. The default state would seem to be feeling neither one way nor the other. Instead, state (in)authenticity is just that: a temporary experiential phenomenon brought to the fore by situational factors. These results accord with those of Fleeson and Wilt (2010), who found that authenticity fluctuates more within than between people.

Participants reported strong motivations regarding state (in)authenticity: They wanted to experience authenticity and avoid inauthenticity. Motivation does not necessarily translate, however, into an ability to control the frequency of these experiences. Motivation seems insufficient to avoid state inauthenticity especially, suggesting that this state — more so than state authenticity — may be driven by factors outside the individual's control.

Experiential Content of State (In)Authenticity

Why do people seek to experience authenticity and avoid inauthenticity? According to Erickson (1995), emotions are central to the experience of (in)authenticity. Studies 1 and 2 confirm that the "emotional ambience" of authenticity is largely positive, whereas for inauthenticity it is largely negative (Heppner et al., 2008; Rice & Pasupathi, 2010; Turner &

Billings, 1991): State authenticity feels relatively good, and state inauthenticity feels relatively bad. Framing the distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity only in terms of experiential valence, however, would be an oversimplification.

Authenticity. Study 2 pinpointed the emotions associated with feeling “real”: Contentment/satisfaction/enjoyment was the most important emotion prototype, followed by calmness/relaxation/relief, enthusiasm/excitement/enthralment, and love/compassion/affection. Notably, these are primarily low-arousal, positive emotions (Shaver et al., 1987).

Findings concerning the experiential themes and needs satisfied offer an account for the predominance of these emotions in state authenticity. In most-me events, *Fun* was the most frequently identified theme, followed by *Familiarity*, *Sociality*, *Hanging out*, and *Achievement*. Themes such as *Bereavement*, *Illness*, *Failing one’s own or others’ standards* were rarely observed. The needs that were most likely to be satisfied in authenticity experiences were self-esteem, autonomy, relatedness, and pleasure. Study 2 also suggested that most-me experiences satisfy the need for competence, with a relatively high incidence of the *Achievement* theme across Studies 2 and 3 corroborating the relevance of competence to authenticity.

Taken together, a feeling of contentment and comfort with oneself and with others, when combined with a sense of one’s own individuality (autonomy) and competence, are indicative of authenticity. This supports SDT’s (Deci & Ryan, 2000) premise that satisfaction of the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness facilitate authenticity. Leary (2003), for different reasons, also theorized that the experience of authenticity depends on the satisfaction of the need for relatedness, so long as it is achieved through autonomous means. The results are consistent with this theorizing too. Neither perspective directly addresses the role of self-esteem needs in the experience of authenticity, though it can be inferred from sociometer theory. Studies 2 and 3 demonstrated that satisfaction of self-esteem needs coincides with the sense of authenticity.

The important role of self-esteem in facilitating an authentic state is bolstered by findings concerning the ideal self: In Study 3, participants in the most-me (vs. least-me) condition rated their experience as having greater overlap with their ideal self for nine out of ten attributes.

Activation of the ideal self may, ironically, make people feel “real.” If so, the experience of state authenticity could, in part, reflect self-enhancement biases (Swann, 1990). Or people have internalized ideal-self standards as part of their real self (Sherman et al., 2012). A third possibility is that feeling “real” contributes to feeling ideal; that is, activation of the ideal self follows from experiencing oneself as ‘real.’ The theme analyses showing that relatively mundane (rather than extraordinary) activities such as “hanging out” and returning to “familiar” places are strongly associated with authenticity bolster the latter interpretation.

Neither SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000) nor Leary (2003) posit that satisfaction of the need for pleasure is important for authenticity; our results suggest otherwise. That is, positive affect may not merely be an outcome of authenticity (Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Heppner et al., 2008; Wood et al., 2008); it may also be a precursor. Consistent with this contention, Fleeson and Wilt’s (2010) experimental studies showed that increasing positive and decreasing negative affect predicted increasing state authenticity.

As described previously, Fleeson and Wilt (2010) also found that people who behaved in an extraverted, agreeable, conscientious, emotionally stable, or open way felt authentic, no matter their actual standing on these traits. Situations in which one is behaving extravertedly, agreeably, openly (etc.) are reminiscent of those in which needs for relatedness, autonomy, competence, self-esteem, and pleasure have been satisfied. That is, situations in which these needs have been met afford expression of these personality traits. Thus, it is not necessary, for example, that an introvert’s true-self concept comprises extraversion (Sherman et al., 2012).

Ultimately, although our studies identified several needs closely associated with authenticity (self-esteem, autonomy, relatedness, pleasure, competence), they do not tell us which are necessary or sufficient to produce this experience. Additionally, whereas the results show that satisfaction of the need for money/luxury was infrequently observed, this does not necessarily mean that the less-frequent needs were unsatisfied; it could mean that the need is irrelevant. Experimental work is needed.

Some researchers have theorized that heightened private self-awareness is related to authenticity (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Koole & Kuhl, 2003; Wood et al., 2008), whereas others have implied that an absence of self-awareness may be more conducive to authenticity (Turner & Billings, 1991). The current results support neither hypothesis; or both. On average, private self-consciousness was at the scale mid-point, suggesting that authenticity experiences involve neither high nor low private self-consciousness. Alternatively, the middling score may reflect an averaging across a bimodal distribution of low and high private self-consciousness. Supporting the latter proposition, exploratory cluster analyses of participants' ratings in Study 3 suggest that, indeed, there may be significant and meaningful phenomenological variability within these experiences; that is, there may be common subtype patterns of experience that averaging cannot capture.² Accordingly, future research should investigate this prospect further.

Inauthenticity. Harter (2002) posited that inauthenticity manifests as “psychological tension” (p. 383). Supporting and extending this description, Study 2 showed that feeling untrue was associated with anxiety/unease/tension/stress, followed by disappointment/dismay/discouragement, sadness/depression/shame/loneliness, and anger/irritation/disgust/envy/frustration. Anxiety is thus the signature emotion of least-me experiences. Indeed, anxiety was observed in nearly 90% of the event descriptions and public self-consciousness was uniformly high. Anxiety is negative in valence and high in arousal. Thus, per a circumplex model of affective space, the experiences of authenticity and of inauthenticity can be perceived as opposites (Russell, 2003).

In the least-me events, *Facing difficulty* was the most-frequently noted experiential theme, followed by *Feeling judged*, *Doing as expected*, *Isolation*, and *(Failing) own or others' standards*. Need satisfaction was extremely low across the board. The needs least likely to be satisfied — as perceived by the MTurk raters (Study 2) and by the participants themselves (Study 3) — included pleasure, physical thriving, and money/luxury. Together, the results concerning

² The cluster analyses results are not presented here due to space constraints, but are available upon request.

themes and need satisfaction indicate that failure to have the need for pleasure satisfied is at the heart of the inauthenticity experience.

Additionally, public self-consciousness is critical to the production of inauthenticity, as evidenced by participants' high ratings of this construct. Furthermore, the narratives commonly referred to feeling the judgment, scrutiny, or evaluation of others or following the expectations of others. Indeed, in some of the descriptions, and as per Leary's (2003) contention, being concerned with others' evaluations and needs may have been done in the service of achieving popularity/influence (and, ultimately, self-esteem); but — by and large — inauthentic events are those in which such attempts meet with failure. This claim is supported by the gap between the frequency of the themes *Feeling judged* and *Expectations* compared with the frequency of satisfaction of the need for popularity/influence. We thus suggest that it is high levels of public exposure coupled with experiencing difficulties or negative affect that produces inauthenticity.

Authenticity versus inauthenticity. Is the experience of authenticity the simple converse of inauthenticity? While there is clear support for this notion (state authenticity is associated with low-arousal positive emotions, greater need satisfaction, and higher ideal-self overlap, whereas state inauthenticity is associated with a high-arousal negative emotion, lesser need satisfaction, and lower ideal-self overlap), they share some characteristics. First, they are both social experiences. We are reminded of the philosophical conundrum concerning trees falling in forests and whether they make a sound if no one is there to hear it (attributed to George Berkeley, 1685-1753). Similarly, people largely do not feel authentic (or inauthentic) unless another is present. Second, both experiences involve a modicum of private self-consciousness. In the case of authenticity, self-consciousness may emanate from communicating about the self to accepting others (Lopez & Rice, 2006), whereas its presence in inauthenticity may follow from interacting with judging others. Indeed, for both experiences, private and public self-consciousness are positively correlated ($r = .48$ and $.41$, respectively, both $ps < .01$).

Prescriptive Versus Experiential Authenticity

We would like to highlight a distinction *within* state authenticity between what can be experienced subjectively versus prescriptions concerning how to achieve it. Prescriptions concerning authenticity are criteria that must be fulfilled for an individual or behavior to be deemed "authentic". These criteria include value- or trait-behavior consistency, self-awareness, rejection of external influence, unbiased processing of one's attributes, and openness and honesty with others (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Sheldon & Elliot, 1998; Wood et al., 2008). Recent research, however, suggests a dissociation between experiential and prescriptive state authenticity. For example, people who temporarily behave in an agreeable, extroverted, conscientious, stable, and open manner — regardless of their actual traits — feel more authentic (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Sheldon et al., 1997). Additional recent findings indicate that simply being primed with power makes people feel more authentic (Kraus, Chen, & Keltner, 2011). If this dissociation exists more generally, it would be a mistake to draw inferences about the subjective experience of authenticity from the observed success or failure to meet prescriptive criteria. That is, the subjective experience of authenticity need not follow from fulfillment of the prescriptive criteria and, conversely, the experience of inauthenticity need not follow from failure to fulfill these criteria.

For example, the results of our studies offer little support for the idea that either deep awareness or unbiased processing of one's attributes play a role in experiential authenticity. With respect to the former prescriptive criterion, private self-consciousness was only moderately strong in experiences of state authenticity. Also, there was little evidence in the narratives' content that people were assimilating contradictions within themselves, as there was significant overlap between the real and ideal selves. Although the least-me narratives showed that the feeling of inauthenticity often arises from the failure to meet one's own standards (a value-behavior violation), the most-me narratives rarely described instances of people behaving in accord with their core values. For instance, benevolence is a value that is held strongly by most people (Schwartz & Bardi, 2001), but very few most-me narratives described instances of helping others. Thus, while prescriptions concerning relational orientation, rejection of external

influence, and violations of value-behavior consistency (for inauthenticity) possess some ecological validity, there is a discrepancy between these experiences and prescriptions concerning awareness, unbiased processing, and value-behavior consistency (for authenticity).

Limitations and Future Directions

Although we used an experimental design to examine the similarities and disparities between the experiences of authenticity and inauthenticity, the conclusions we have drawn are correlational. As such, the causal order of events remains uncertain. Do feelings of authenticity follow from positive affect or vice versa? Does satisfaction of the need for self-esteem mediate the relationship between relatedness satisfaction and state authenticity? Future research should take advantage of experimental designs to isolate the causes, co-actors, and consequences of state authenticity. It is conceivable that there is a self-reinforcing loop between some of the constructs (e.g., positive mood increases authenticity which, in turn, yields positive mood).

The retrospective nature of the narrative methodology also constitutes a limitation, as the narratives may not accurately reflect people's in situ experiences. Attributions of one's past emotions, thoughts, and behavior to the "real me" may be a function of reconstructive memory processes, which are known to be fallible both generally (Loftus & Palmer, 1974) and specifically regarding recollection of one's past emotions (Levine, 1997) and past behaviors (Gramzow & Willard, 2006). Although memory for experiences of (in)authenticity is an interesting phenomenon, it is important to know if and how these feelings arise in the moment.

A third limitation is reliance on participants from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) societies (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). As Henrich et al. (2010) noted, self-enhancement biases are less common amongst East Asians (vs. Westerners) and autonomy of choice is less valued and prevalent in non-Western nations. Participants were also primarily young adults. It is possible that middle-age or older adults would report at least somewhat different experiences of (in)authenticity, as people tend to become more assertive, agreeable, and emotionally stable with age (Roberts, Wood, & Caspi, 2008). Accordingly, future research should determine if our results generalize to different cultures and ages.

Coda

Authenticity and inauthenticity are common experiences that people are eager to seek out (the former) or avoid (the latter). The experience of authenticity centers on contentment and social ease; or, in the case of inauthenticity, a lack thereof plus anxiety. Reflecting on these experiences evokes positive mood and nostalgia. The present findings demonstrate that state authenticity is separable from trait authenticity and, further, that the experience of state authenticity does not wholly map on to prescriptions as to what should make people feel (in)authentic.

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Table 1

Studies 2-3: Narrative Theme Frequency by Narrative Condition.

| Label | Study 2 | | Study 3 | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| | <i>Most me</i> | <i>Least me</i> | <i>Most me</i> | <i>Least me</i> |
| Fun | 58.3 _a % | 11.2 _b % | 40.0 _a % | 8.3 _b % |
| Familiarity | 53.4 _a % | 19.4 _b % | 35.6 _a % | 8.3 _b % |
| Contemplation | 51.5 _a % | 55.3 _a % | 13.3 _a % | 12.5 _a % |
| Achievement | 46.3 _a % | 9.2 _b % | 37.8 _a % | 2.1 _b % |
| Sociality | 45.9 _a % | 70.5 _b % | 33.3 _a % | 27.1 _a % |
| Hanging out | 43.6 _a % | 29.1 _b % | 35.6 _a % | 8.3 _b % |
| Novelty | 31.3 _a % | 43.3 _b % | 24.4 _a % | 25.0 _a % |
| Doing as expected | 18.8 _a % | 50.4 _b % | 8.9 _a % | 43.8 _b % |
| Feeling judged | 16.5 _a % | 73.7 _b % | 8.9 _a % | 52.1 _b % |
| Helping | 15.7 _a % | 4.5 _b % | 22.2 _a % | 10.4 _a % |
| Creativity | 15.3 _a % | 3.0 _b % | 6.7 _{a†} % | 0.0 _a % |
| Facing difficulty | 12.7 _a % | 75.4 _b % | 17.8 _a % | 70.8 _b % |
| Isolation | 6.8 _a % | 53.0 _b % | 6.7 _a % | 39.6 _b % |
| (Failing) others' standards | 5.3 _a % | 37.6 _b % | 0.0 _a % | 22.9 _b % |
| (Failing) own standards | 5.2 _a % | 49.6 _b % | 2.2 _a % | 25.0 _b % |
| Illness | 1.5 _a % | 6.7 _b % | 2.2 _a % | 14.6 _b % |
| Bereavement | 0.7 _a % | 3.0 _a % | 0.0 _{a†} % | 6.3 _a % |

Note. Within a row for Studies 1 and 2 separately, frequencies with different subscripts are significantly different from one another at $p < .05$. The symbol † denotes frequencies that differ at $p < .10$. Themes ordered by Study 2 most-me descending frequency.

Table 2

Study 2: Comparisons of Emotion Cluster Frequency, Need Satisfaction Frequency, and Idealistic Portrayal Rating Mean (SD) by Narrative Condition.

| | <i>Most me</i> | <i>Least me</i> |
|---|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Emotion clusters | | |
| Contentment/ satisfaction/ enjoyment | 91.0 _a % | 6.0 _b % |
| Calmness/relaxation/relief | 67.2 _a % | 3.0 _b % |
| Enthusiasm/excitement/enthrallment | 65.7 _a % | 5.2 _b % |
| Love/compassion/affection | 56.5 _a % | 5.2 _b % |
| Pride/triumph | 53.4 _a % | 6.0 _b % |
| Anxiety/unease/tension/stress | 11.9 _a % | 88.8 _b % |
| Surprise/amazement/astonishment | 11.3 _a % | 6.8 _a % |
| Sadness/depression/shame/loneliness | 7.5 _a % | 64.9 _b % |
| Anger/irritation/disgust/envy/frustration | 4.5 _a % | 56.0 _b % |
| Disappointment/dismay/discouragement | 3.7 _a % | 66.2 _b % |
| Fear/alarm | 3.7 _a % | 33.6 _b % |
| Need satisfaction | | |
| Self-esteem | 85.8 _a % | 14.3 _b % |
| Relatedness | 78.2 _a % | 16.7 _b % |
| Autonomy | 68.9 _a % | 15.7 _b % |
| Competence | 60.4 _a % | 13.4 _b % |
| Pleasure/stimulation | 59.2 _a % | 2.3 _b % |
| Security | 58.6 _a % | 9.0 _b % |
| Meaning | 55.3 _a % | 7.5 _b % |
| Popularity/influence | 42.1 _a % | 13.5 _b % |
| Physical thriving | 15.8 _a % | 3.0 _b % |
| Money/luxury | 5.3 _a % | 3.0 _a % |
| Idealistic portrayal | 3.84 _a (.70) | 2.45 _b (.82) |

Note. Within a row, frequencies (or means) with different subscripts are significantly different at $p < .05$. Emotion clusters and needs ordered by most-me descending frequency.

Table 3

Study 3: Means (SD) and Independent T-Test Comparisons of Most-Me and Least-Me Narrative Ratings.

| | Most me | Least me |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Positive affect | 5.54 _a (.98) | 3.11 _b (1.40) |
| Inspired | 5.62 _a (1.21) | 2.25 _b (1.73) |
| Enthusiastic | 5.62 _a (1.60) | 2.56 _b (1.74) |
| Excited | 5.53 _a (1.55) | 2.52 _b (1.75) |
| Alert | 5.53 _a (1.44) | 4.54 _b (1.62) |
| Determined | 5.40 _a (1.44) | 3.67 _b (2.06) |
| Negative affect | 2.39 _a (1.43) | 4.28 _b (1.57) |
| Nervous | 2.98 _a (1.94) | 4.91 _b (1.98) |
| Distressed | 2.40 _a (1.94) | 4.56 _b (1.90) |
| Upset | 2.18 _a (1.83) | 4.42 _b (1.89) |
| Scared | 2.24 _a (1.71) | 3.77 _b (2.18) |
| Afraid | 2.16 _a (1.65) | 3.73 _b (2.12) |
| Private situational self-consciousness | 4.02 _a (1.48) | 4.81 _b (1.31) |
| Public situational self-consciousness | 2.87 _a (2.07) | 5.31 _b (1.78) |
| Self-esteem | 6.20 _b (.92) | 3.83 _a (1.52) |

| | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Overall ideal self | 5.44 _a (.95) | 3.98 _b (1.42) |
| Common sense | 6.07 _a (1.21) | 4.23 _b (2.16) |
| Intellectual | 5.91 _a (1.15) | 4.26 _b (2.29) |
| Sense of humor | 5.91 _a (1.40) | 4.02 _b (2.11) |
| Leadership | 5.82 _a (1.63) | 3.57 _b (2.26) |
| Social competence | 5.73 _a (1.59) | 3.64 _b (2.06) |
| Emotional stability | 5.42 _a (1.66) | 3.77 _b (1.98) |
| Self-discipline | 5.22 _a (1.76) | 3.98 _b (2.02) |
| Physical attractiveness | 5.13 _a (1.60) | 4.00 _b (1.91) |
| Artistic | 4.91 _a (1.68) | 3.78 _b (2.13) |
| Athletics | 4.29 _a (1.88) | 3.61 _b (1.87) |
| Overall need satisfaction | 5.09 _a (.90) | 2.60 _b (1.19) |
| Autonomy | 6.29 _a (1.29) | 2.40 _b (1.84) |
| Self-esteem | 5.87 _a (1.39) | 2.94 _b (2.11) |
| Pleasure/stimulation | 5.71 _a (1.85) | 2.15 _b (1.50) |
| Relatedness | 5.60 _a (1.84) | 2.89 _b (2.10) |
| Meaning | 5.18 _a (1.76) | 2.60 _b (2.08) |
| Competence | 5.09 _a (1.92) | 2.89 _b (2.11) |
| Physical thriving | 4.84 _a (2.03) | 2.09 _b (1.28) |
| Popularity/influence | 4.73 _a (1.84) | 2.85 _b (1.92) |
| Security | 4.69 _a (1.79) | 2.91 _b (2.11) |
| Money/luxury | 2.87 _a (2.05) | 2.32 _a (1.45) |
| Upon reflection | | |
| Mood positivity | 6.18 _a (1.34) | 3.04 _b (1.77) |
| Nostalgia | 5.05 _a (1.93) | 2.46 _b (1.90) |

Note. Within a row, means with different subscripts are significantly different from one another at $p < .05$. Positive affect attributes, ideal-self attributes, and needs ordered by most-me descending means; negative affect attributes ordered by least-me descending means.